

Learning lessons

*An independent review of
Indigenous education in
the Northern Territory*



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Reprinted by Department of Employment, Education and Training, November 2001.

ISBN 0 7245 3449 0

For further information please contact

Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training
GPO Box 4821
Darwin NT 0801
Telephone (08) 8999 5511

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Printed for the Northern Territory Government by the Government Printing Office of the Northern Territory
P&P01/180-350

Northern Territory. Dept. of Education.
Learning lessons : an independent review of indigenous education
in the Northern Territory.

Darwin, N.T. : The Dept., 1999.

218 p. ; 30cm.

Education — Northern Territory — Evaluation. Education —
Northern Territory — Statistics. Aborigines, Australian — Education —
Government policy — Northern Territory — Evaluation.

Multilevel Assessment Program (MAP)

The MAP testing program, which assesses students using standard literacy and numeracy tests, has been used in remote schools since 1986 and urban schools since 1984. The MAP tests are set at various profile levels—two through to four. At Year 3 level it is expected that most students will be achieving profile level two, while profile level three is the benchmark standard for students in Year 5. Those children who do not make profile level two are considered to be ‘at risk of not making adequate progress’.

Up until last year, the testing in remote area schools used different instruments to those of urban schools.⁴⁷ The non-urban tests targeted eleven- to sixteen-year-olds, as opposed to children in specific primary grades in urban schools. Thus, neither the tests used, nor the age groups, were comparable.

Furthermore, the age groups targeted within the urban category were also regularly altered. Urban school tests were conducted with children in Years 5 and 7 in 1996—ten- and twelve-year-old students—Years 4 and 6 in 1997—nine- and eleven-year-old students—and Years 3 and 5—eight- and ten-year-old students—from 1998 onwards. Thus longitudinal trend analysis within urban or non-urban groupings is simply not possible.

Prior to the tests, teachers make evaluations of each student, before assigning them to a particular test level. Students can be exempted from the whole test if their teachers believe they are likely to achieve a near zero score on the lowest level possible. Over the years, there have been extremely high levels of exemptions in many remote schools—in some instances entire schools have been exempted. Since reported results noted the number of children exempted, but made no comment on their achievement, all that can be inferred from such high exemption levels is that the children were expected—by their teachers—to score on the tests a near zero result.

In accordance with Commonwealth benchmark reporting requirements, from 1998, eight-year-old and ten-year-old Indigenous students were tested—equating to Years 3 and 5—across both urban and non-urban samples, enabling system-wide comparisons to be made for the first time. Again from 1998 onward, exemptions will continue, albeit with stricter criteria, but the way in which exemptions are reflected in the test results has altered. Pre-1998 exemptions were not included in the overall results for a particular school, a custom which conformed with usual test result reporting practices whereby the average is derived from the scores of all those who actually sit a particular test. From 1998, exempted children are included together with test participants in calculations of the percentage of students who are achieving the national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy, on the basis that an exemption automatically means a student has not achieved the benchmark.⁴⁸

While it is too early to assess the impact of 1998 amendments to MAP procedures, it is assumed that when 1999 data becomes available, any improvements will be reliably reported and trends will be evident. It is the review's belief that, as a result of these shifts, the benchmark reports will inevitably present a worse situation than has been reported in previous years.

⁴⁷ For instance, in 1997 non-urban students were tested for stages two through to six and urban students were tested for stages pre-five to beyond seven.

⁴⁸ Benchmark achievement is based on a cut score. Students with scores at or above it are considered to have achieved the benchmark and those with scores below the cut score are deemed not to have achieved.